



Beyond the Brick Wall

United States Immigration Strategies

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Introduction

For many of us, the stories of where our ancestors came from, when they came, and how they traveled here have been lost or have faded with time. Perhaps you have hit the “brick wall.” In this class, we will discuss the records and strategies used in U.S. research to discover the homeland of your ancestor.

Objectives

- Introducing Immigration Research
- U.S. Records for Immigration Research
- Sidestepping the Pitfalls
- Helpful Strategies
- Case Study

Introducing Immigration Research

- Why is immigration important?

Immigration is the event when your ancestor came from another country to the United States. Immigration records may reveal the hometown or village where your immigrant ancestor was born. With this important piece of information, the process for finding records in the homeland can begin.

- Why is immigration research difficult?

There are many reasons immigration research is difficult. These reasons include, open borders and ports. No one was keeping track who walked off the ship or over the border. Name changes can affect your ability to determine your correct ancestor. Incorrect assumptions from family stories and traditions may hamper the search process. Moving into the records of the homeland without enough information to determine your ancestor can be very frustrating and unsuccessful, and perhaps your research habits could be improved as you learn about effective tools for analyzing the records.

United States Records for Immigration Research

- **Immigration Research**
 - **Customs Passenger Lists** (1820-1891). Filed by ships masters starting 1 January 1820. Though no official forms were used, required information included age, sex, occupation, country-of-origin, and intended country of settlement.
 - **Immigration Passenger Lists** (1891-1954). The U.S. Office of Immigration

collected passenger lists starting in 1891 and developed a standardized form by 1893. Required information included name, age, sex, occupation, nationality, marital status, last residence, final destination within the United States, if joining a relative who and where, original purchaser of the ticket, race (1903), place of birth (1906), and name and address of closest living relative in the country-of-origin (1907).

- **Border Crossings.** Starting in 1895, Canadian authorities allowed U.S. officials to create passenger lists for incoming immigrants who intended to cross the border into the United States. Immigrants were given inspection cards upon arrival into Canadian ports which were handed off at the U.S. border. Canadians crossing the border were not recorded until 1906. Similar procedures were implemented along the Mexican border also starting in 1895.
- **Passport Applications.** Passport applications may provide information about naturalized citizens if they returned home. The earliest passport was issued in 1796, but passports were not required for traveling abroad until the twentieth century. Passport applications may include information about an individual's date and place of birth, current residence, and where and when they were naturalized.
- **Helpful resources** for immigration records
 - FHL recorded class: *The Origins of the Melting Pot: U.S. Immigration Records, 1820-1957*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/651219356564317>
 - FHL class handout: "The Origins of the Melting Pot: U.S. Immigration Records, 1820-1957"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/img_auth.php/5/56/TheOriginsoftheMeltingPotHandoutEmilyBakly.pdf
 - FS Research Wiki article: "United States Emigration and Immigration"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Emigration_and_Immigration
- **Naturalization Records.** Naturalization is the process whereby an alien becomes a citizen. In the United States, naturalizations date from 1790. Three sets of papers were usually created during the naturalization process: Declaration of Intentions, Petitions for Naturalizations, and Naturalization Certificates. Prior to 1906, declarations required that applicants list only their country-of-origin. After 1906, applicants were required to list their place of birth. Search "United States Naturalization and Citizenship in the FamilySearch Wiki to learn more."
 - **Helpful resources** for naturalization records
 - FHL recorded class: *Certifying Citizenship: An Introduction to U.S. Naturalization Records*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/844960146923872>
 - FHL class handout: "Certifying Citizenship: An Introduction to U.S. Naturalization Records"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/img_auth.php/4/41/Certifying_Citizenship_A_Gamble_Oct_2022_JMR.pdf
- **Privately Held Records.** Records held by families may include clues about your ancestor's place of birth. Locate family letters, bibles, pictures, and other documents that have been passed down through the family.

- **Census Records.** Census records include information on your ancestor's country-of-origin, date of immigration, and citizenship status. Find your ancestor in every available census and read through each column carefully.
 - The **1850 census** was the first census to ask for place of birth.
 - The **1880 census** was the first census to ask for place of birth for both father and mother.
 - The **1900-1930 censuses** asked for immigration and naturalization information including year of immigration (1900-30), number years in the U.S. (1900), whether naturalized (1900-30), and year of naturalization (1920).
 - The **1910 and 1920 censuses** asked for the native tongue and, in 1920, the native tongue of the person's parents.
- **Vital Records.** Vital records may list a person's date and place of birth. An immigrant's marriage record, death record, and the records of their children's births and deaths may include the name of the town where the immigrant originated.
 - **Helpful resources** for U.S. vital records
 - FHL recorded class: *The Bred, the Wed and the Dead, An Introduction to U.S. Vital Records*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/323965789506311>
- **Obituaries.** Obituaries, especially those published in the twentieth century may include place of birth, date of immigration, or name of ship.
 - **Helpful resources** for obituaries
 - FHL recorded class: *Extra! Extra! The Scoop on U.S. Newspaper Research*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/509816130951196>
 - FS Research Wiki article: "United States Obituaries"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Obituaries
- **Church Records.** Religion acted as a tie to the old world. Ecclesiastical leaders often noted a town of origin when recording marriages, deaths, and even the births of children. Other individuals belonging to the same religious community may also have emigrated from the same location.
 - **Helpful resources** for U.S. church records
 - FHL recorded class: *Can I Get an Amen? Discovering Your Family in U.S. Church Records*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/290171553197700>
 - FS Research Wiki article: "United States Church Records"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Church_Records
- **County Histories.** County histories can provide clues as to where a large community of immigrants originated. Biographical sketches of prominent members of the community may also include immigration information. Also locate sketches for all your ancestor's children and grandchildren.

- **Military Records.**
 - **Helpful resources** for military records
 - FHL recorded class: *Searching in the Trenches, Introducing U.S. Military Records*
<https://www.facebook.com/page/169173515997/search/?q=U.S.%20military>
 - FS Research Wiki article: "United States Military Records"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Military_Records
- **Additional helpful resources for pre-1850 research**
 - FHL recorded class: *Beyond the Brick Wall: Strategies for pre-1850 U.S. Research*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/1270804487067478>
 - FHL recorded class: *1790-1840 United States Census, They're Better Than You Think!*
<https://www.facebook.com/familyhistorylibrary/videos/1384178602077337>

Side-stepping the Pitfalls

- **Open borders and ports.** Understand immigration law for the time. Were records created?
- **Name variations.** First names and surnames can have multiple spellings for the same name. Be liberal in your thinking about how a surname was spelled. Names may change through the generations. Make a list of all possible spellings and search using the variations. Be flexible and use wildcards in your searches.
- **Passed down family history.** Interview *all* family members. Analyze the information.

Researching country of origin too soon. Ask an expert about the location you have found. Is it a small enough jurisdiction?

Helpful Strategies

- **Research logs, charts and tables.** Keep a research log. This is a must for success in the early records.
 - Research log templates: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Research_Logs
 - National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>
 - FamilySearch.org: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Census_Forms
- **Get organized.** Being organized will save you time. Find a method that works for you and you will be more likely to use it consistently. Prepare a method for saving your documents. Take a class in genealogical organization.
 - FS Research Wiki article: "Organize Your Genealogy"
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Organize_Your_Genealogy
- **Evaluate and analyze.** Find a person in every record. Find each person in every possible record. For example, when looking for death records search for a death certificate or register, obituary, cemetery record and funeral program. Each record can contain different and helpful information and may answer your question about place of

birth.

- **Cluster methodology, the FAN club.** Friends, associates, and neighbors, that's the FAN club. Keep lists of surnames from marriages, witnesses on documents and neighbors in the census records. Use a good chart for tracking.
- **Ethnic groups.** Is your ancestor in an ethnic community? Many groups immigrated from the same area and settled together. Possibly there is a local historical society who can help you understand the ethnic community.
- **Beyond the ancestor.** Find all known family members. Search for everyone in the family – that includes siblings, aunts, and uncles and sometimes even nieces and nephews. The more you know about the structure of the family, the more success you will have in recognizing your family.

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